



## DATCP Thanks Vernon Zickert for Decades of Service

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**Contact:** Donna Gilson  
608-224-5130, [donna.gilson@wi.gov](mailto:donna.gilson@wi.gov)  
Jim Dick, Communications Director  
608-224-5020, [jim.dick@wi.gov](mailto:jim.dick@wi.gov)

*Editors note:*

*The photo of Vernon Zickert shown here is available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/widatcp/15775811095/>.*

*Photos of the recognition ceremony are available at <http://www.facebook.com/widatcp>.*

MADISON – Vernon Zickert’s apple orchard was never about making a living. It was about making a life.

It was about working with his family; it was about indulging his wife’s love of the apple trees; it was about giving his customers good apples and good memories.

Vernon turned 100 on October 25. Along with that milestone, he also finished another season of trapping insects in his orchard outside Deerfield – season 30-ish. No one’s really sure how long he’s been working with the pest survey, an effort of Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, but it’s been at least since the 1980s. Department Secretary Ben Brancel today presented Vernon with a plaque and letter of commendation, recognizing his long years of service to the people of Wisconsin.

The pest survey enlists volunteer farmers who set traps, supplied by the department, to learn when insects show up each year. These “cooperators” check the traps weekly and report their findings to Krista Hamilton, who coordinates the survey and compiles the weekly Pest Bulletin. The bulletin alerts growers to the presence of pests so that they can time treatments, applying pesticides or taking other control measures when they will be the most effective. There are about 60 cooperators, half of whom set traps in apple orchards.

“Their efforts are vital to the success of our survey program,” Hamilton says. “They supply insect counts and observations from locations across the state that we could never access on a weekly basis. They have tremendous expertise on the pests they monitor. I learn new things from our cooperators every year. Supplying traps and lures in exchange for valuable observations is an extremely cost-effective and efficient way of collecting data.”

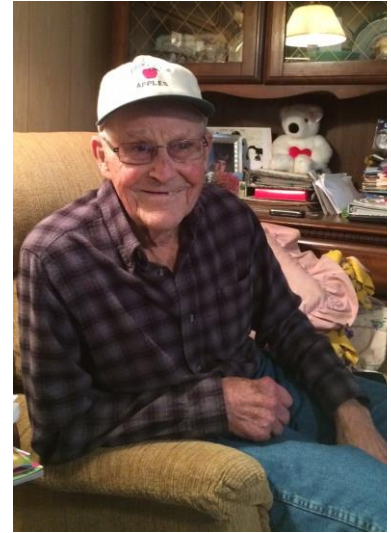
Lee Lovett, long retired from the survey program, first signed Vernon Zickert on after stopping by the orchard one day, as Vernon recalls. Lovett says, “He was an enthusiastic, loyal and reliable reporter.” And, says Hamilton, “He is still one of our most reliable reporters!”

“It was a big thing for me,” Vernon says. It was interesting to see the patterns over the years, and it was also important for his business to know when the most common apple pests were around – codling moths, redbanded leafrollers, tent leafminers, obliquebanded leafrollers, and apple maggot flies.

“I always set out more than one trap,” he says. “You only check one, but I would catch more.” That meant fewer pests bothering his apples.

And while it might seem easy to count insects stuck to Tanglefoot® inside a cardboard trap, it’s not always so. At peak flight, there could be hundreds. “They get the whole thing black. There’s a grid inside the trap, so you count one of the squares and estimate from that,” he explains.

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*Vernon Zickert, 100, has worked with the Wisconsin Pest Survey since the 1980s.*

## ZICKERT – ADD ONE

To understand Vernon's fascination with the world of apple pests, you have to go back to when he and his wife, Margaret, were newlyweds in the mid-1940s. They set up housekeeping on their dairy farm on Highway 73, and there were a few apple trees. "There were Wealthies, Greenings, Russets -- the varieties they had years ago," he recalls. Both he and Margaret had grown up on farms with fruit trees, so he started buying more.

"The first trees I planted, the mice riddled," he remembers. "I didn't know enough to keep the grass away or protect them."

Those first years, his father-in-law sold some apples from Vernon and Margaret's farm, "and from there, on it went."

They started with some boards over a couple of saw horses out in front of the farmhouse. "One day a guy said to me, 'Why don't you move that up by the house?'" and that got Vernon to thinking. Pretty soon the three-car garage turned into an apple shop and storeroom. That got a little crowded by the time they had close to 200 trees, so they built a new shed. The shed got too small, so they added on. They had a hand-cranked cider press outdoors, until they upgraded to a mechanized press inside what had been the milk house.

"We made 30 to 40 gallons at a time, and it was all spoken for," Vernon says. Sunday afternoons brought a parade of customers.

His daughter, Louann Hoffer, notes, "The policy was that everyone who came in got an apple, and you could taste whatever you wanted. That's what a lot of people remember."

The Zickerts grew the varieties that people wanted. Tastes changed and new varieties came on the market. At the beginning, Red Delicious apples were the favorite. But when Red Delicious became a common supermarket variety bred to be shipped cross-country, people passed on the tastier locally grown ones without knowing what they were missing.

Vernon and Margaret had five daughters to help out with the orchard and the cows. His brother, Leslie, logged a lot of orchard hours, too. One by one, the girls left home. But then their husbands, and their children, and their grandchildren arrived and started working in the orchard. In the late 1960s, Vernon sold the cows and went to work as a night custodian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He retired from that job in the mid-1970s.

But he kept the orchard. "The orchard was supposed to be for retirement. My wife had a lot to do with it. She's the one who was really interested in the apples," he says. When she suffered a stroke and had to spend some time in a nursing home, "She wanted to come home. When she got home, she wanted to be right out in the orchard."

When Margaret died in 2004, he still kept the orchard. Two years ago, he got sick and couldn't handle the business anymore, but his daughters took on caring for the trees and selling the apples. This year, the family finally had to let the orchard take care of itself and stopped selling apples.

But Vernon still gets out there on his John Deere tractor sometimes to check on things. And he still trapped insects this season and reported his results, so other growers could benefit.

What advice would he give a young orchardist just starting out? "He doesn't know what he's getting into. It's a lot of work, spraying and trimming." Long pause.

Then, "You gotta love the work. And you gotta eat the apples."

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